



Congressman Tim Bishop

FIRST DISTRICT -- NEW YORK

NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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BISHOP REJECTS SMITHTOWN RAIL YARD SITES

Smithtown— Following a public meeting last Monday with the Kings Park Civic Association (KPCA), Congressman Tim Bishop today sent a letter to the Long Island Rail Road expressing his concern with the current proposed sites in Smithtown.

At the meeting, Bishop solicited comments from the community to make sure he expressed their thoughts in his letter. In his letter, Bishop expressed concern that the sites would have an adverse impact on the local economy, threaten the local environment, and harm patients at St. Catherine of Siena Hospital.

"After meeting with local residents and hearing their concerns, I am very opposed to this project," Bishop said. "People in Smithtown have done a great job of educating the community and rallying opposition."

A copy of the letter follows:

December 22, 2003

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Congressman Timothy H. Bishop, Comment on Proposed Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) Port Jefferson Branch Rail Yard

I write to express my profound concern with the sites proposed for a LIRR Port Jefferson Branch rail yard. As a strong supporter of public transportation, I believe that we must make investments now to relieve congestion on our roads and to prepare for increased ridership on our public transportation networks. I believe, however, that the current sites under consideration would pose a severe burden on local residents, while failing to meet future transportation needs.

Future Needs on the Port Jefferson Branch Line

I am concerned that this project, which is purportedly based on long-term growth projections, could be obsolete within a matter of years. As the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA)

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notes in its Scoping Document, “From an operational perspective, storage space for electric trains should be provided east of the terminus of electric service on the Huntington/Port Jefferson Branch.” The report then states, “The LIRR has long-term plans to electrify the entire 22-mile branch to Port Jefferson Station....” Reading these statements, it would seem that MTA’s proposal does meet the long-term vision its own planners have presented. Why construct a rail yard that could someday be twenty miles west of the electrified terminus of the Port Jefferson Branch, when that would not meet LIRR’s operational needs?

Electrifying the entire Port Jefferson Branch would also eliminate the wasteful redundancy of running distinct fleets of electric and diesel trains. This would enable LIRR to convert the diesel storage yard in Port Jefferson to an electrified yard, which would free up capacity to store electrified trains, while reducing pollution and noise in the Port Jefferson area. This could lessen the LIRR’s storage needs and the urgency of constructing a sixteen-railcar storage yard.

Public Notification Process

While I appreciate that the MTA has held public meetings to discuss the six final sites, I still have many concerns about the overall process. Given the glaring flaws in the remaining sites, I am confused about any process that could have eliminated 13 sites but kept a site near a hospital under consideration. I am particularly uncertain as to why the Greenlawn site was eliminated, given the LIRR’s initial enthusiasm. I would also encourage further exploration of the possibility of a rail yard at the old Cerro site in Syosset, whose location could give LIRR additional operational flexibility. The public should have been consulted and informed from the very beginning, not after thirteen of nineteen sites were already eliminated. As work on the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) continues, I hope that MTA’s decision-making process will be transparent, and that the agency will give the public and elected officials ample notice of any decisions.

Environmental Concerns

Many of the sites still under consideration pose severe threats to the local environment. Preparing these sites would require clear-cutting acres of open space currently filled by indigenous vegetation. The sites would also generate harmful runoff not only from trains, but also from chemicals used for cleaning and servicing. When washed away by rain, these contaminants have the potential to pollute local groundwater and waterways. For example, the St. Catherine of Siena site feeds the Upper and Middle Basin of the Nissequogue River, and the Psychiatric Center site feeds the Lower Basin of the Nissequogue.

Sites 11 and 12, Vicinity of Bread and Cheese Hollow Road

As noted in MTA’s own documentation and video presentation prepared for the public, these sites feature steep slopes and severe difficulties with grading that will be costly and difficult to overcome. These sites also border residential areas, which have developed quickly in recent years. These industrial sites currently have little land buffering them from local homeowners.

Acquiring these properties for the purpose of constructing a rail yard-a non-taxable entity-would also pose a severe burden on the local economy. These two sites sit on land zoned light industrial/residential. Current and future revenue from these sites will be critical for the Town, whose tax base now depends on approximately 4,600 homes and only a few small businesses. Eliminating the possibility of future development on either of these sites would be detrimental to the local economy at a time when the Town has committed itself to improving services for local residents.

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Site 13, Kings Park Psychiatric Center

If the purpose of this project is to improve transportation efficiency and ease congestion on our roads, then this site must be categorically rejected. A rail yard at the Kings Park Psychiatric Center site would wreak havoc on the movement of goods and the travel of local residents. Route 25A is the main business corridor in Smithtown, a crowded arterial under the best of conditions-it is also a component of the Long Island Heritage Trail. Bisecting this road for a rail yard would subject the Smithtown business community to constant disruption and would virtually halt the flow of commerce. This congestion would be worsened by the extension of electrification to the Kings Park Station, which would generate additional congestion from riders interested in boarding at the line's electric terminus.

According to the MTA's report, disruptions would be more frequent during the morning rush, precisely when business owners start their day and commuters begin their trip to work. This is a particularly bad time to block movement on a critical local road. Finally, a rail crossing would inhibit the activities of the local volunteer fire department, whose headquarters are located downtown. It would be tragic if a fire truck could not reach its destination in a timely fashion because a train was leaving the yard.

Site 16, St. Catherine of Siena Hospital

The fundamental problem with this site is clear from its title-it sits on the property of a local hospital, vital to the health and well being of Smithtown residents. Developing Site 16 would require clear-cutting acres of undeveloped space, which currently provide a quiet buffer for the hospital. This densely wooded area features steep slopes and would not be conducive to constructing a rail yard. This site is also home to the hospital's human resources facility, which would need to be torn down and reconstructed elsewhere on the property.

Most disconcerting, however, is the imminent threat that the vibrations, noise, and exhaust generated by the rail yard would pose to hospital patients. The hospital performs eye surgery and cardiac catheterizations, sensitive procedures that would be compromised by the vibrations caused by train movement and maintenance in close proximity to the hospital. The yard would also be located within a few hundred feet of the fresh air intakes for the hospital's operating rooms. Should MTA ever decide to store diesel trains at the yard, the exhaust could prove fatal for hospital patients undergoing sensitive operations.

Finally, I have been informed that the St. Catherine of Siena site borders the only Section 8 subsidized housing in Smithtown. Given federal prohibitions against projects that disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations, it would seem that selection of this site would also violate federal law. I urge MTA in the strongest terms to reject consideration of this site.

Conclusion

I appreciate the MTA and LIRR looking toward the future and the growth in public transportation ridership that will stem from the East Side Access project. As a member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, and a strong supporter of the East Side Access project, I understand that accommodating growth will require improvements that may impact our communities. I am concerned, however, that the rail yard proposal under consideration would fail Long Island in too many ways. It would significantly worsen the quality of life for residents in the vicinity of the yard, while failing to address the long-term needs of the Port Jefferson Branch. I urge MTA to reject the sites under consideration, and to seek alternative means of coping with increased train ridership.

Sincerely, Tim Bishop
Member of Congress